Collateral Regret: Part II

By Kaveh Shirazi

"Really!" she shouted.

It was Kaylie, the neighbor. She had read everything about me—my name, the news, the speculation.

"What the fuck!"

I slammed the door behind me, holding my daughter tightly by the hand.

"Dkaumi," I thought. "Dkaumi, I failed you."

"What have I done!" I shouted aloud.

"Oh my goodness!" I whimpered.

"Dad!" Dkaumi cried. Her small voice cracked with fear and confusion.

"What happened!?" she asked. Dkaumi was only seven. She wanted answers. She deserved them. But all I could think about was how my sister Klujin—who I had trusted—was secretly following us.

It was just me and Dkaumi in the car. We were supposed to be fleeing to safety. But Klujin had turned around. I caught a glimpse of her vehicle in the rearview mirror, tailing us.

I slammed my foot on the gas. The car jolted forward, sparks of acceleration igniting from the wheels. We were on the freeway, doing eighty-five miles per hour, heading out of the area.

"Dad, why!!!!" Dkaumi sobbed.

Far from our speeding car, a mobile unit of civilian enforcers and practitioners had assembled at the charred remains of the Iranian airport. The destruction from the rocket attack had left a landscape of smoldering rubble and blackened steel.

They had a suspect, and they knew his name.

"It's something that was available to everyone on the internet!" said one of the young Iranian investigators, shaking his head in disbelief.

Beside him stood Officer Bahram Tofighi, a seasoned investigator with a permanent furrow in his brow and a heavy presence that silenced those around him.

"How do you suppose people get away with things like that?" Officer Tofighi asked, glancing down at the tablet with Ahmed’s image and digital profile.

"It could have happened to anybody," replied the younger officer.

"I've been tempted myself sometimes—needing money…"

Back on the road, the wind howled against the car’s frame. My knuckles were white on the steering wheel.

"Dkaumi, you have to stay quiet!" I said. My voice trembled. "I have just done something that I regret very much."

"But I had to do it!"

"Aaughrgh! Mhmgph!" she whimpered, half-scared, half-excited, holding on to her seat.

The car finally slowed. I needed fuel. I tried to forget about the internet, the laptop, the anonymous instructions, and the credit card I had used to destroy the Iranian airport—and the lives of hundreds, maybe thousands, of families.

A flashing light caught my attention.

An Iranian police cruiser pulled up. The officer hadn’t yet noticed our frantic escape.

The vehicles were mostly concentrated at the epicenter of the nuclear blast.

The officer approached my car, casual but alert.

"Hello, sir. How are you?" he asked.

I couldn’t fake a smile. I pointed behind him.

"Look at the disaster behind you!" I cried.

He turned. His eyes widened as he took in the horrific scene—the scorched airport, the chaos, the broken skyline. And without another word, he turned and ran back to his vehicle, speeding off toward the scene.

It was a miracle. I had gotten away with it. Again.

I drove to the nearest gas station, heart still pounding, hands shaking as I filled the tank.

But the reprieve was short.

The next day, the press had plastered my image across every screen in the nation.

"Looks like he’s definitely a suspect," a journalist said on a live report, holding up a blurry surveillance photo.

"That person destroyed an airport!" another anchor exclaimed.

"That person killed hundreds of people! The airplanes were fully loaded with civilians."

And all I could hear in my head, louder than the reporters, louder than the explosions, was my own voice—the voice I didn’t want to believe was mine.

"And went to sleep like nothing happened!"

"People talk about me, and I know what they're saying!"

"I have to get out of here!"

"I'm not just guilty, I'm the one who did it!"

"I did it on the internet!"

"It's something that was available to everyone on the internet!"

"I knew I could destroy the lives of people!"

"I did it anyways!"

"I did it for $35,000, and there should be more money coming!"

"Dad, why!!!!" Dkaumi’s cry from the car echoed in my head again and again.

"Who let them in the airport!?" I shouted at the windshield, tears dripping from my cheeks onto the steering wheel.

The guilt was no longer something I could hide or run from. It ate at me. My breath was shallow. My lips were cracked from dehydration and stress.

I had destroyed so much, and for what?

I gripped the wheel harder.

I needed to disappear, and fast. The world was closing in.

But now, with Dkaumi in the backseat, quietly sobbing, her tiny fingers clutching her toy rabbit, I didn’t just have myself to think about.

I had ruined her life too.

And that might be the greatest crime of all.